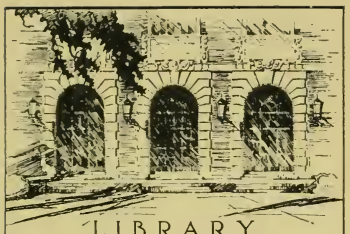

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17.

THE CHURCH:

HER POSITION AND HER TROUBLES.

Is there not a cause? The Divorce Court.

A Letter

ADDRESSED TO

THE HONOURABLE AND RIGHT REVEREND

THE LORD BISHOP OF NORWICH.

"Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you."—Joshua vii. 13.

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LETTER.

Buxton Vicarage, Norwich,
July 23rd, 1877.

My Lord,

In the Report of the Meeting of the Church Defence Association which appeared last week, your words addressed to myself are stated thus: "Nothing can exceed the importance of the question on which you are now entering."

If therefore I interpret those words aright, I feel sure I shall have your forgiveness in saying by letter what I had wished to say *vivâ voce* in your presence, had time permitted.

I had proposed to myself to refer to the following points relating to the Reform of Convocation, viz.:—

1. The union in one Convocation of Canterbury and York.

2. The union of both Houses of Convocation in one.

3. The reduction of the number of ex-officio Members and an increase of elected Proctors.

4. The *additional* necessity, if so, of endowing the office of Proctor.

5. The gain both to Parliament and to the Church of a House of Lay Representatives, *if in lieu of referring all Church questions to Parliament;* but of the deadlock of such *additional* Lay Agent, *if* reference to Parliament should be retained as now.

Still all these were not so important, to my mind, as the hopeless state we are in, of effecting any real work for the good of the Church collectively at this moment. And why is this?

When our Lord said to the Pharisees and Sadducees (St. Matthew xvi. 3), "O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky, but can ye not discern the signs of the times?" He meant surely that those who were in earnest towards God for their own or others' salvation—not hypocrites—should look beyond the external aspect of the world of nature in the sky and clouds, to trace out those deeper causes, which are producing in every generation their own lasting effects; those secret influences which are formulating the future history of each present time, and the open or less avowed tendencies of every age and generation in succession.

Even in this external world of nature, the far-off branches of the wide-spreading tree do not

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wither, except there be some injury at the root, or below the surface; and in man's works, the stately ship does not sink unless there be a leak sprung below the waters' level, or some misplacement of ballast; nor does the arch fall except the keystone gives way. How much less can there be effect without cause in the state and progress of that Temple of The Spirit,—of that Body, of which Christ is the Head, in which the hairs upon every head are all separately numbered before God.

And if thus we look around us at this moment, I think, my Lord, two facts must strike us. On the one hand, God is wonderfully deepening the religious life of individuals—men and women—all over our land, leading them on to a life of piety and self-devotion, and to all good works; and blessing the work of their hands, so that there has never been a period in which so much has been done for God and the Houses of God, for religion, for the poor, and for the relief of suffering of every kind and description, as in these last twenty-five or thirty years, all by individual exertion. But, on the other hand, we cannot fail to notice for some years past a continuous blight upon the corporate action and the collective life of our Church, as a Church. Nothing which affects the Church as a *whole* succeeds: nothing that we attempt to do, as a *Church*, prospers:—

1. If we look at the Education Question. That owes its present prominence mainly to the work

of the Church, and more especially to the self-denying labours of the Clergy, but is now being more and more taken out of their hands, while all they have done, "whilst others slept," is spoken of contemptuously as nothing.

2. Look at the number of men, in proportion to the increase of churches and population, who offer themselves as Candidates for Ordination, and of these how very many have not received a University Education,* which was the rule, almost without exception, till recent times.

3. Look at the fading interest felt—not by individuals but—by the public at large, in the work of Missions,—the very evidence, as I may say, "stantis aut cadentis ecclesiæ."

4. See how the Reform of Convocation, on which the hopes of so many for the restoration of peace and of unity are built, halts.

5. See the continual defection from us of men, whom we can ill spare, from one cause or another.

6. See these late Privy Council Appeal Judgments, one after another, which satisfy few; and if they settle any point it is only to add to the sharpness and bitterness of our divisions.

7. Above all look at the Churchyard Question,

* It is stated in the *Guardian*, July 25th, at the late Ordination—1. At Durham, out of twenty Deacons ordained there was but one University man. 2. At Gloucester the proportion was one out of six. 3. At York the exact number is not given.

(following the abolition of Church-rates) in which, disguise it as we please, the whole principle of Disestablishment is involved.

See the Lords, many of whom measure their own lands by miles, voting for confiscation, forgetful, I suppose, that confiscations of land have ever begun with Church property, but have seldom or never ended there. Noble Lords thus giving a helping hand of their own to "The Association for the Subdivision of Land," which they *may* live to regret.

And what, my Lord, I venture to ask you, of your own Order in this matter? I heard the Archbishop say, some few months ago, that there never was a time when the Episcopate was more united than now. Could he have said this had his Grace's Charge been delivered after Lord Harrowby's most unhappy move?

Here was a question of vital interest to the whole Church, which has been discussed all over England again and again. Here was a question which the Government was not only ready and anxious to settle, but so far to support the Church, as to propose the only fair *compromise* which has yet been devised. Here was a question on which no less than 13,000 of the Clergy of England—immoveable a body as they usually are—sent in their names in support of the Government Bill within about one week's time: and what did the Bishops do?

On this vital question of such interest to the whole Church, thus expressed, twelve Bishops voted in the last division, fourteen did not vote, (one being absent from illness). No unequal division this into two bodies.

But of these twelve, eight voted with the Government and four with Lord Harrowby: and thus the whole weight of the Episcopate, which by itself, if united, (independent of that influence which their union would have exerted) would have carried the Bill, was expressed by exactly four votes!

No wonder, my Lord, that there should be, amongst other signs of the times, more and more visible indications every day of soreness, of distrust, and alienation of the lower towards the higher order of Clergy, when they feel themselves thus *deserted* on a question, in which they, above all men, have an interest, and *have expressed it:* when we see (as I have heard remarked) that all that the (Arch)bishops of late do in Parliament, is to pass laws for the regulation of the fees of their own officers, and such Bills as the Public Worship Act, which is rending us in two, and driving some Churchmen into union with the Liberationists; or the Dilapidation Act, which presses so hardly upon the Clergy, as to be referred to a select Committee of the House of Commons, from both of which laws the Bishops themselves are wholly exempted. For this "class-legislation" touches only the paro-

chial Clergy, who have *no one voice of their own in either House of Parliament*—a fact which ought to be more borne in mind.

My Lord, why is all this? Why, amongst so very much that is great and good in our midst, have we the prospect nearing upon us of this grand old Church being broken up into two, if not three, distinct and independent bodies?* and if so, how will our small rural parishes fare? Why is all this? Whence the perils which surround us? Why are our enemies so powerful, ourselves so powerless? To my mind, it needs no Solomon to answer such a question—no Daniel to read the handwriting on our walls.

There is a law of recent enactment, it may be ten or fifteen years, or even more ago, which directly contravenes the plainest possible declarations of the law and will of God—repeated again and again, expressive of its importance—sets that aside, subverts, contradicts, and abrogates it. Yet we, *as a Church*, neither at the time, nor since, have ever done the least thing worthy of this great Church—the professed Guide of our Nation's conscience—or spoken the lightest word, or entered the feeblest protest, against its enactment or its continuance.

Bishops and Archdeacons year after year deliver very excellent Charges, dwelling upon

* See, since these words were written, the speech of the Bishop of Winchester, in the *Times* of July 28th, p. 6.

every subject of general interest to the Church at large, or of their own Diocese or District;—Church Congresses and Diocesan Synods or Conferences meet, and talk; but upon this point not a word is ever said. We allow God's law day after day, year after year, to be set aside, but we are silent: we have done, and we are doing, nothing to stir the conscience of this still Christian land upon this head. We fold our arms, and nurse the serpent, which is preying upon our vitals. In this matter we have been unfaithful to the Trust of God's Word committed to us as God's Church.

Oh! that God would raise up amongst us a new Elias to denounce the Ahabs and Jezebels, who abound in our midst more and more! Oh! that God would raise up a new St. John to tell the Herods and the Herodias' of our day, "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife!" (St. Mark vi. 18). What is this law of God, and law of England?

1. God has said by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (St. Matthew xix. 6).

The law of England says, it is lawful for the Judge of the Divorce Court to put asunder any number of couples—to give both parties, alike innocent or guilty, licence for remarriage with any one else, and to make their children legitimate.

2. God says (St. Luke xvi. 18;)* "Whosoever putteth away his wife and *marrieth another* committeth adultery, and whosoever marrieth *her that is put away* from her husband committeth adultery."

The law of England says, it is possible for anyone to put away husband or wife, and for either party to marry again. Whether it be adultery to do so in the sight of God or not is not taken into consideration.

3. St. Paul says twice over in nearly the same words, (Rom. vii. 2, 3, and 1 Cor. vii. 39), "The woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband, *so long as her husband liveth;* but if her husband be *dead*, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if *while her husband liveth* she be married to another man she shall be called an adulteress, but if her husband *be dead* she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man." Could any law be plainer, or more unmistakeably worded?

How then, my Lord, can we expect the blessing of God, if we, as a Church, do nothing to procure the repeal of such a direct violation of one of those fundamental laws on which, more than on any other, society is built—of a law which is undermining the whole moral feeling of the country; which is spreading its poison deeper and wider

* See also St. Mark x. 11, and St. Matthew v. 32, and xix. 7, 8, 9.

every year, every day, till the state of society in England is rapidly becoming as corrupt as it was in France before the Revolution swept away all before it? Men and women are beginning to look upon marriage as a temporary arrangement, to be continued and observed so long, and only so long, as it suits both parties.

Have we had God's blessing upon us since we allowed this godless institution to be set up, and have submitted to it in silence ever since—bowing down to the image which Nebuchadnezzar has set up? Rather let us reflect how our difficulties, our dangers, and our disunion as a Church, have all multiplied and grown within the last three years; and what happened almost coincidently but this?—

A Judge of the Provincial Courts of Canterbury and York (united) had to be appointed. Now if it had been boldly said, "If there be no one else duly qualified, we will let the appointment lapse to the Crown rather than select the very man who has been the State's officer for years to violate the law of God in hundreds, or it may be in thousands of cases." That would have been a noble confession of Christ before men, and might have stirred men's minds on this subject, and done a world of good.

But what *was* done? This—

Though there may have been a hundred others as fitted for the office of Provincial Judge as

my Lord Penzance, he is the very man selected by the two Archbishops to hear and to determine spiritual cases and causes—arguments not only for or against points of external ritual, which are very dear to some minds, and on which all may differ, but of the power, grace, and efficacy of the holy Sacraments, and all those deepest questions which touch the souls of earnest men—he, whose ears have been filled day after day "with all the filthy conversation of the wicked," and the foul disclosures of the Divorce Court. "With the holy *thou* shalt be holy; and with a perfect man *thou* shalt be perfect. With the clean *thou* shalt be clean; and with the froward *thou* shalt learn frowardness."

Thus has the Church been far more deeply and more directly compromised in this matter than by mere silence. Thus, *to the eyes of the world*, have the proceedings of the Divorce Court been whitewashed over by the two highest ecclesiastical authorities in the kingdom! While this Ex-Divorcer of man and wife, whom God has joined together, never to be put asunder by man, now holds his court in the old historic home of the English Church!

My Lord, I am sorry to offend, as offend I must, in thus presuming to denounce this violation of the law of God by this recent law of England. We are taught to say month by month, "The Law of Thy mouth is dearer unto me than thousands

of gold and silver."—"I love Thy commandments above gold and precious stone." But if no one will speak out on this subject, I feel that I must, assured as I am that never shall we have peace and safety; never shall we have, as in former times, that Blessing from above, "without which nothing is strong, nothing is holy"—no work can prosper, no work succeed,—until we have done our best *as a Church*, in all ways, in season and out of season, in the fear of God and not of man.

1. To reaffirm and reassert the indissoluble nature of the marriage bond except by death.

2. To reassert that the only divorce contemplated, or permissible, under the Gospel is the old form, "a mensâ et thoro"—that putting away which is *not* putting asunder.

3. Till we have proclaimed to all "that it should *never* be lawful to put asunder those whom God by matrimony has made one."

4. Till we have declared to all that the remarriage of a divorced person in the lifetime of the other is *no* marriage *at all* in God's sight, and therefore that a religious service in which God's blessing is invoked upon such union—upon such violation of His law—is to do worse instead of better, as some suppose—is to take God's name in vain, is to desecrate our churches as often as this is done.

True, our Lord added on this very point, "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to

whom it is given," (St. Matthew xix. 11), but it is for the Church, as the Witness and Keeper of the Truth, to assert and maintain God's Law and Will in its integrity: whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear.

I beg to subscribe myself,

Your Lordship's faithful and obedient Servant,

W. J. STRACEY.

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By the Rev. W. J. STRACEY, M.A.

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